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IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 000006

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SUBJECT: SHIA CLERIC SEPARATES RELIGION FROM POLITICS

CLASSIFIED BY POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT S. FORD FOR REASON 1.4
(D).

11. (C) Summary: We have met twice in the past two weeks with Shia cleric Saayid Ayad Jamal Ad-Din who warns that the forces of ideological and religious extremism will dominate the new National Assembly without Coalition support to educated moderates and liberals such as himself. He claimed that despite his own personal plea to join with moderates, many representatives to Muqtada Al-Sadr have now sided with the United Iraqi Alliance and some 25 members are now on this list tipping the balance even more for extreme elements of the Shia community. While this cleric says religious parties won't fare well in the Shia heartland, he himself seems more interested in meeting Iraqi communities located in Britain and the U.S. This is especially odd as he has personal stature as a cleric and descendent of the prophet that would enable him to raise the delicate issue of separating religion and politics in a way that other liberal politicians cannot. End summary.

12. (C) Saayid Ayad shared with PolOff on December 21 his concern that Iranian intervention is affecting Iraqi internal issues. He suggested that Iran is backing major parties like Da'wa and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), providing millions of dollars for media coverage and public influence. Ayad said he had received an invitation to go to Iran to meet with Iranian leaders, but after seeing some of his interviews on Al-Arabiyya TV attacking Ali Khamanei, the Iranians withdrew their offer. Ayad went on to say that he has spent many years overseas arguing for a secular Iraq. While recognizing the sanctity of Islamic beliefs, he felt those beliefs should be kept in the private realm, separate from politics. Ayad said he hopes that with additional support, he can convey this message to the Iraqi public who he believes would welcome this with open arms.

13. (C) Ayad told PolOff that he has joined Iraqi National Congress member Saad Saleh Jabor's Nation's Party list which has 67 names running for the National Assembly and about 17 names for the Provincial Council in Karbala. Their hope is to capture a maximum of 50 seats and no less than 20. According to Ayad, the party is highly dependent on the overseas vote, as many of its party members live in exile. Ayad hopes to appeal to overseas Iraqis who want to see a new, democratic Iraq similar to the western, largely democratic countries they are now living in.

14. (C) According to Ayad, the United Iraqi Alliance list was headed towards a significant disappointment in the elections until they agreed to allow Muqtada Al-Sadr representatives to join the list. Ayad believes that this decision was approved by Ayatollah Sistani himself to bolster the list's popularity among younger, less educated people. Ayad explained that most of the 25 names associated with Muqtada's following are relative unknowns. Of these 25 names in the list, he said three are in the first ten and ten names are in the first fifty. Ayad claims he obtained this information from a trusted go-between working with Muqtada Al-Sadr's camp and Mohammed Reda Al-Sistani's office. To counter this effort, Ayad said he tried to recruit several Muqtada followers to the Nation's Party, including spokesperson Ali Semaysom. Semaysom reportedly turned down the

offer stating that he is not permitted to participate as a religious figure himself.

¶5. (C) Comment: It is interesting to hear a cleric like Ayad explain how he has attempted to lure radicals like Ali Semaysom to his party with the intent of reducing the overall influence of religion in politics. While he insists that religious parties will not fare well in the Shia heartland (he comes from Najaf himself), we have no indication he has gone to southern Iraq to campaign. Instead, he told us on December 30 that he wants to meet Iraqi communities in Britain and the U.S. In a separate conversation December 30, Jamal Udeen stressed to us that the United Iraqi Alliance list will promote religious involvement in laws relating to personal and communal conduct as well as national politics. He alleged there is more than financial support binding Iran to the religious parties featured on the Alliance candidate list. Jamal Udeen, in some ways, would be the ideal liberal politician to raise the delicate issue of separating religion from politics. As a cleric and "sayyed" - a descendent of the prophet Mohammed - it would be harder for Islamists to criticize him as irreligious. End summary.

¶6. (U) Minimize considered.

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